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THE CREEK INDIANS AS MOUND BUILDERS

By JOHN R. SWANTON

NEAR the southern edge of the old Creek Nation, Oklahoma, five or six miles from Indianola and between that point and Eufaula, is an earthwork which has all the marks of considerable antiquity. It lies upon high ground a few miles distant from Mill creek. A narrow lane divides it near the middle, leaving part in a cotton field and part in a strip of woods now owned by an Indian named Choctaw Given. The principal feature of this work is an oval ridge, now a foot to a foot and a half high, in the timber, readily traceable across the lane, and still discernible throughout most of its course in the cultivated field, its entire circuit being about 750 feet. Within this oval, at the end now covered by woods, is a mound about ten feet in diameter and three feet high, but there are no other well-marked mounds, although some artificial inequalities are still discernible in the cotton-field. At one point in its periphery the oval ridge is broken and a circular space about twenty-eight feet in diameter can be made out cutting through it. Nearby are a number of small pits, three to four feet across and a foot or two deep. Within and upon the earthen ridge are a number of trees, principally post oak, twelve to eighteen inches in diameter, while one giant oak entirely within the enclosure measures at least four feet through.¹

Two or three miles west of this work, on the side of a hill above a notable spring known as Kealedji spring, is an earthwork of similar character. The oval, 650 feet in circuit, can be plainly traced, although more than half is now covered by yards for cattle and hogs, separated by worm fences and belonging to a farmhouse close by. An elderly woman who had lived upon this farm for a year knew nothing about the earthwork in question. Two or three

¹ On my second visit to this place, in May, 1912, I found that this tree had fallen.

ovals, similar in character, are said to be scattered through the same region, but I did not see any of them. From the archeological point of view this is about all there is to be said about these oval works, and whether they were for ceremonial, mortuary, or defensive purposes, on that ground alone it would be impossible to say.

Now, as a matter of fact, we know the history of the works described, for what they were used, and approximately how long it took to form them. They were the busk-grounds first regularly occupied by the Creek Indians when they moved into this country from Alabama, the one first described being that used by the Tukabatchi and the second that of the Kealedji, while the unvisited ovals were the busk-grounds of the Eufaula, Atasi, and other branches of the Creek Indians. The Tukabatchi mounds were made between the time of the removal of the Creeks (1836-1840) and 1871, and those of the Kealedji during approximately the same period.

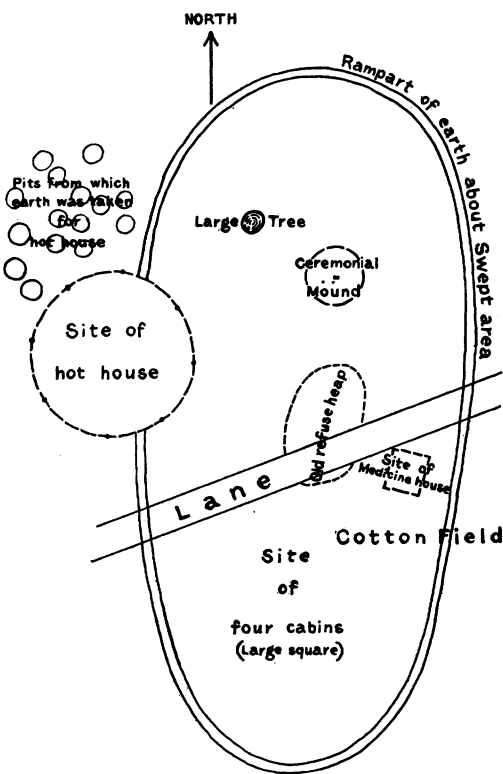


FIG. 43.—Site of old Tukabatchi busk-ground.

Fig. 43 gives an idea of the general arrangement of the Tukabatchi ground as still traceable and as explained by a man who had seen it when in use. North of the lane, which runs over one end of an old refuse heap and close to the site of the medicine-house, where the sacred vessels and shields were kept, is the big tree and the good-sized mound referred to above. This latter was

used in the war dances and other ceremonial performances, and in the old country it was surmounted by a ceremonial ball-post, the "chunk-post" of earlier writers, but for some reason or other no post was placed upon this mound nor upon the ceremonial mound in the present busk-ground of the Tukabatci. On the old Kealedji ground (fig. 44) a very large circular rise (on the line of the wire fence) is all that is left of this mound, which was probably actually surmounted by a post in this case. The circular space referred to as cutting the Tukabatci oval (fig. 43) is now seen to be the site of the old "hothouse," and the pits near it the places from which earth was taken to cover its roof. The four cabins were principally south of the lane in the cotton-field.¹ At the Kealedji site (fig. 44) little more can be made out except the site of the fire in an angle of the worm fences. At the northern end, where it has been little disturbed, the oval ridge is even higher than that of Tukabatci. On account of their method of formation these oval ridges surrounding the busk-grounds are of peculiar interest to the archeologist, and deserve special consideration. In any recently established ground of this kind among the Creeks and Seminole such a ridge is wanting, while in those which have been occupied for a number of years, such as Nuyaka, there is a distinct ridge of the same character, though much lower, perhaps from four to six inches high. The explanation of this difference is as follows: The area of a Creek busk-ground, occupied by the four cabins (*tcuka lago*, "big house") and the ceremonial ball-post, is called the "swept area" because it must be swept off every year before and during the annual busk and also before each of the three "stomp dances" that precede it. In Tukabatci it would seem that this area is cleaned off about nine times every year. The sweepings of any one year, however, especially now that the old customs have fallen into abeyance, are not very great, but in the course of several seasons a slight ridge makes its appearance around the edge of the "swept area," and this ridge is steadily, if slowly, increased. If the same ground is used for very many years, however, the ridge becomes quite formidable in size and we have the condition presented

¹ Subsequently I learned that they were where the lane now is.

at old Tukabatci and old Kealedji. It should be added that the area of the four cabins is either swept oftener or a little more thoroughly than the rest of the area, so that some towns show an inner ridge surrounding them. Besides this a small mound of earth is frequently used nowadays to represent the old "hothouse", and another is a kind of women's headquarters, where the women form before dancing into the big square. Other mounds are formed accidentally around trees or other obstructions, the refuse piling up against them instead of being swept past. The area is by no means entirely freed of trees, as is to be observed in a number of grounds occupied at the present time, and the big oak tree within the Tukabatci oval was always there. Some of the others at the same place may have taken root before the ground was abandoned.

A certain type of earthwork is thus shown to be of Creek origin, and this type should be kept in mind by archeologists working in Alabama and south-

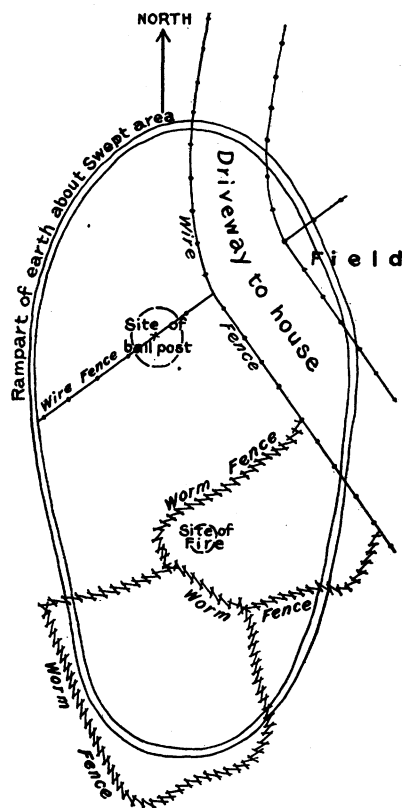


FIG. 44.—Site of old Kealedji busk-ground.

ern Georgia. At the same time it should be remembered that the earthen ridge is in the nature of an "accident" resulting from a certain custom. We may say that it is not the "fill" but the "cut" that is of importance to the Creeks, and they might and probably did level the ridges if they became uncomfortably high. Conscious mound-building does occur, however, in the mound for the ball-post or the ceremonial dances, and, going farther back, William Bartram informs us that anciently the ballground, or "chunk-yard" as he terms it, was between the "big

house" and the "hothouse," and that each of these latter was placed upon an artificial mound. From these facts it appears that the claim of the Indians of the Creek Confederacy as mound-builders can not altogether be denied, the proofs extending down by regular continuity to the present time and backward to greater and greater works in the remote past.

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